

Sermon by Rachel Lauren Clark

Nobleton/Schomberg United Church

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I've got an overdrawn checking account and a credit card that's beyond its limit. Work has been very difficult for me lately, and I just found out that I have an immune disorder, probably caused by overwhelming amounts of stress. I am not speaking with my parents and siblings anymore and my love life? It's horrible. I am only 40 years old. This is supposed to be the prime of my life and I'm overburdened and drowning. And it's only Monday.

It's dusk now and I'm driving past the faint glow of neon signs illuminating a strip mall. It's raining and I can barely make out the signs of each one as I drive by as the light from the streetlamps reflect off each drop on my windshield. A McDonald's over there, I think. That looks like a coffee shop across the street. The red from the taillights look like rubies scattered across the street and it's putting me into a state of catatonia. All I know right now is that I need something new, a new direction, a new path to follow. I know that I can't keep doing what I'm doing. I can't keep doing this.

Suddenly out of the corner of my eye a different sign catches my attention. It says "Feeling lost? My book is your map. Love, God" and just below it in even bigger letters, "All Are Welcome" followed by "Service nightly - 6pm". It's next to a storefront which has been cleverly converted into a church. The church is next to a Starbucks, which is next to a trendy gastropub. It's a sign from above. It's a divine message created just for me, at just the time I needed to hear it.

I must admit though, I am frightened of churches. I grew up in a very conservative right wing evangelical church where speaking in tongues was standard, and where the only path to salvation was being born again. On Sundays, I would walk around and knock on doors to try and proselytize to what I considered to be the unbeliever. I was told that if I didn't do that, I was going to suffer, and so I ignored the signs that said "No trespassing" or "beware of dog", and went anyway. Even after doors slammed on me and even when I had guns pointed at my face, even when dogs were unleashed on me, my mantra remained that there was no risk too great for God.

And I watched as people were excommunicated from the church. One person for the suspicion that he was a homosexual. Another for challenging Church theology. Another person because she had an abortion after having an affair with someone outside the church. All were told to "correct their ways" and they could come back to the church with love and attain God's grace as their ally. All of them were my dear friends, and none of them ever returned.

The message I received was "Conform or be gone", and so I chose the latter. I didn't agree with any of these decisions, I missed my friends (as I wasn't allowed to speak to them if I was a member of the church). I was worried about who would be next. Would it be me? What if they found out about me? Because to me being excommunicated was a certain ticket to an eternity I couldn't imagine. If I was going to have redemption, I was going to have to make it alone. I finally found the risk that was too great.

I didn't quit or make a big scene, I just left, changed my phone number and moved. And just like that it was over. Nevertheless, I was hurt, angry, and filled with contempt. And I didn't have the emotional

capital to commit to another inclusive church movement. Not going to church anymore meant that I was free from the constraints of the Sabbath and open to ideas of atheism. In an act of self-deprogramming, I devoured books like Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion" and Dr. Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time". It all made sense, and just like my now former church offered all the answers and left little room for question. I became an atheist, because atheism provides all the answers.

Now here I am, some years later at a crossroads. Receiving a timely message from the Almighty. Should I just stop and go in? Maybe things have changed.

But as much then as I wanted to stop the car, I knew that the sign which said "All are welcome" meant "All are welcome with conditions". You had to be straight, probably white, of some positive financial status, male and you must believe that Jesus Christ is your personal redeemer and savior or else you must be prepared to defend yourself in some form. All are welcome, as long they meet the criteria. All are welcome, as long as they unconditionally agree with our theology. All are welcome, as long as they look like us. All are welcome, if they can pay the price of admission.

All are welcome, some terms and conditions may apply.

So, I declined, and I gently stepped on the accelerator and moved more quickly toward my home, running away instead of running toward because a sign proclaiming all are welcome is merely an empty platitude to me. Meaningless in substance and form.

We must understand that the decline of church attendance across every denomination is not simple. It isn't that there are less people of faith, it is that people of faith no longer believe the church can help them on their spiritual journey. Baby boomers have increasingly less influence over contemporary worship. On the other side of the generation gap, Millennials want liturgy – a communal response and participation in the reflection of praise, thanksgiving, supplications and repentance. They want more community, the joining together of people in the worship of Christ. What they don't want is trying to change our churches to be more hip and more cool to suit them. We don't need a Starbucks in the church to attract more millennials and a gastropub to have lunch after service. We need to make more space for them.

But I think it's even more than this - because these are merely symptoms of an even bigger issue. The bigger issue is, in my estimation, that churches have lost the redemptive message of Jesus Christ, and forgotten the community. Many of the churches I have been to around the country were unfortunately not very Christ-like. They go through the motions each Sunday. Many parishioners come to church because they believe attendance is a penance and a conditional of attaining Grace. The people who are equally as devout, and no longer come to church, is because they have a perception that our theology has gone off the rails, is steeped in elitism, that worship is specifically for them and the type of people they associate with. Not for others.

And if others come, we feel it is our duty to change them to be more like us. As a theologian, I know where this message comes from and let me be very clear when I say that it's nonsense, bunk, harmful, and is destroying the Christian church while emboldening radical evangelism. Which in turn is contributing to the narrative that all churches are not inclusive.

Instead therefore of coming to a church who won't have anyone in the pews that reflects you, as people who increasingly reject the idea that church is only a place to pay a price of penance, and who finds the \$99 Sunday Blowout Sale at Home Depot much more interesting, we lose people.

In fact, I challenge you to go to Home Depot on a Sunday at 11am and look at all the people there. That's the 21st century church. That is a well-attended, well-disciplined church of home improvement. Their theology is that Christ is something they can do on my own, and the church is irrelevant.

But Christ would tell you, as he does numerous times in the Bible, that his redemptive power is for all people. Christ made it a point to be radically inclusive. What does this mean? It means that no matter who you were, what you believed, or the things you did, you had a place at God's table. In more specific terms, if Jesus were alive today, he would embrace the LGBT community, people of colour, the poor and disaffected, street people, and marginalized. Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven".

When I have challenged this with people, their response was to say that they want people who come to their churches to reject sin and they want to help people find the redemptive power of God's love. And what I say is they already have God's love, they are already forgiven for whatever is done and undone. Most of all, it's not in our job description to judge sin.

He has shown you, O Mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

I want to ask you a question, therefore. When the sign at your church says "All are welcome?" do you believe that to be true? If a sex worker came through the doors, how would you treat them? Or a homeless person. Or a Transgender person - like me. Are you treating them as your equal, or as someone who may viewed to be lesser, needing special attention and your spiritual guidance? If you aren't treating everyone who walks through this door as your equal in the eyes of the Lord, then your sign proclaiming all are welcome is meaningless. God loves all their children equally.

On an even more personal note, despite having a great deal of theological education, I don't attend regular church services. Why? Because I don't feel like I am equal in most congregations. And I am not alone. We need to fix that with all our thought, in all of our liturgy, and in all of our theology. Doing so will be more reflective of a Christ-like church.

I'm going to offer you a way to move beyond the sign that states "all are welcome" and back into a place of ancient Christian theology. First, our churches need to be vocally forthright in helping deconstruct structures that marginalize people. That will take a great deal of work and effort to learn and understand these issues. It is more than hanging up a sign proclaiming all are welcome (although that's important), and placing a pride flag on the outside of the building (that is also important), but it means taking a vocal stand on the issues affecting these communities after doing the work to learn about them. When we take a vocal stance, it shows people that the words "All are welcome" really mean everyone. A justice oriented ministry attracts others who want to do justice.

Secondly, it means making space for people to come here and ask difficult questions about theology. Why does God seem to command the Israelites to commit genocide in the old testament, while commanding us that "Thou shall not kill"? Why are the stories about Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and

John so radically different? Faith seeking understanding is the very definition of the study of theology and it is acceptable to God for people of faith to seek understanding of that faith.

Third, to foster a diverse community with diverse opinions and ideologies. The progressive churches who are statistically proven to have better outcomes are ones that have embraced diversity in their congregations and in their ministries. No matter where you are in Ontario, from Timmins to Toronto, diversity exists whether it's apparent or not. If you think you can't have that kind of church in a small town, you can. You just need to move beyond the sign that states "all are welcome".

Our theology needs to be reflective of every person because people won't come to worship where they don't see themselves represented. And this by no means should be understood to be erasing the chalk on the chalkboard and starting over. It means growing and shaping a new theology that is more inclusive, using more inclusive language. Christ is more than a person who died on a cross in Jerusalem. Christ represents the idea that ALL people are equally redeemed in God's Grace.

Finally, to enable everyone who attends church to be a participant in that church and bring their special talent and gifts to community worship of God. If someone wants to read scripture, let them read! Have discussion groups on theology. If someone wants to sing, then let them sing. If someone just wants to pray, then create a space so they can just pray and be present in a holy space.

I believe the future of the church is not doom and gloom. I believe it is bright and fulsome. But it also means undertaking a transformational change to arrive at that destination. It means basing our worship communities as ones that love kindness so much that it becomes an integral part of church life and life outside of church. It recognizes that God is omnipresent and understands much more than we will ever understand, and therefore we don't ever need to speak on behalf of God. Who are we, O Mortals? Walk humbly with God and have faith that things we don't understand, God does. That God has a design and a purpose and certainly doesn't need me or anyone else to speak for them.

And it means performing the work of justice for those who a society deems are not deserving of equality and who deny God's love for only them and people like them. I believe through careful theological study that pushing people away from God by telling them they aren't worthy enough, or have to change in order to come to worship God is the biggest factor as to why all church denominations have falling participation. Ironically pushing people away from God is killing Christianity. So let's draw people in.

Thank you for having me today, and may God's love follow you everywhere. Amen.